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AUTHOR Moran, Charles
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ABSTRACT

In a summer institute, secondary school writing teachers improved their teaching and writing skills through teaching writing by the direct method and through participating in weekly writing tutorials. Too often, writing is taught through such indirect methods as work with grammars, rhetorics, and heuristics, which seem more attractive to teachers than working directly with student writers in the actual business of writing. However, the training of writing teachers should encourage the teaching of writing by the direct method--and the most direct method is the writing tutorial. In the summer institute, teachers acted as editors during writing laboratory classes for high school students, and they participated in post-practicum sessions stressing the diagnosis of particular examples of student writing. They also spent eight hours each week in expository writing on self-chosen topics and were tutored by institute staff members in open-ended tutorials emphasizing direct response to the writing at hand, examination of all rough drafts of a piece of writing, and sharing of writing by tutors. Teachers' essays were published in two volumes during the institute. A formal evaluation of the institute, which included a full-year follow-up, suggested that the institute had been remarkably effective in changing the teaching and editing behaviors of the teachers, as well as their attitudes toward themselves as writers. (GT)

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Teaching Teachers to Write:

The Tutorial Approach

Talk given to session C-14 at the 1980 CCCC

Charles Moran

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The title of this panel is "Theoretical Knowledge and Writing Experiences for Writing Teachers." I will argue that we should have less of the former, and more of the latter. I will argue that a teacher-training course or workshop or summer Institute should have as its absolute center writing experiences of a particular kind: tutorials with a writing teacher. I will argue that the proper model for these tutorials is the relationship between master and apprentice, or, to relieve us of the oppressive Dickensian connotations of that model, perhaps we should substitute something closer to the writing profession: the relationship between editor and writer.

Before getting down to my appointed task, however, I would like to make an observation that will create a context for my argument. The observation is that as a profession we seem to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid the teaching of writing by a direct method. We'll teach writing indirectly, and through the most remarkable of indirections.

For years we taught writing by teaching formal grammar, the naming of parts. In some quarters we still do, despite the accumulation of evidence that the teaching of formal grammar has, if any, a negative effect upon the correctness and quality of student writing. When classical grammar becomes a cropper, we'll find a new mount: transformational/generative grammars. When we tire, as we did in the mid-sixties, of Roberts Rules, we'll begin to listen to Frank O'Hare and the advocates of sentence combining. Or, leaving grammar and sentence combining aside for the moment, we may teach writing by teaching students to do New Critical readings of poetry. Or, almost as wonderful, we may, with Ross Winterowd, insist that the road to good writing is the analysis of expository writing. Today in my heart of hearts I exult with Richard Young and Alton Becker at the possibility that we

will discover, through the medium of linguistics and cognitive psychology, an epistemological heuristic and a grammar that will describe not only the sentence but the paragraph and the essay as well. This marvellous grammar will describe human discourse, and in the manner of its description will link Rhetoric with linguistics, anthropology, and physics in a unified theory that connects the world of mind with the world of matter.

And yet, from another perspective, these indirect methods--work with grammars, rhetorics, heuristics--seems an intricate form of avoidance behavior. As long as we can teach grammars or rhetorics, demonstrate heuristic procedures, demonstrate the analysis of expository prose, or teach literary criticism, we do not have to work directly with a student writer in the actual business of writing.

This avoidance behavior is attractive to us for three broad reasons:

1) It is safe. As long as we teach writing as a subject, we know what we are talking about. If we were to shift our ground and become editors of student writing, we would become vulnerable, for we would be on the student writer's home ground. Moreover, if we became the editor, and not the pedagogue, we might make mistakes. We might make the student writer angry. We might run across a student performance that we could not compete with ourselves.

2) This avoidance behavior is attractive because we are dealing not with student writing but with lovely conceptual frameworks, spidery and light. We can believe that, as writing teachers, we are "real" intellectuals of one sort or another: linguistis, physicists, philosophers---not "just" teachers of writing.

3) The avoidance behavoir is attractive because it is potentially profitable. Any theory or system can become a textbook or a curriculum, and as publishers or program directors, we can leave the writing class forever.

I do not pretend to be the first person to say any of this. In Teaching the Universe of Discourse James Moffett argued ~~decades~~ years ago that we learn to write by writing, and that "the burden of proof is on those who advocate an indirect method." Moffett was particularly hard on writing textbooks, a genre in which "by pedagogical slight of hand, an output activity is transformed into something to be read about." Donald Murray has argued that "the writing teacher should cut class," and turn the writing course into a series of individual conferences.

Yet in general practice, these voices seem not to have been heard. If the CCCC program is an index of our professional concerns, we are now interested primarily in these topics, in descending order of importance: research in the composing process; invention theories; building Freshman Writing programs; and getting grants. All of this is so distant from my Eden: the editor working with the writer---that I begin to despair. But I will pull back from the abyss, and continue on.

If we are to consider the training of writing teachers in the context I have just described, we should discourage the kinds of activity I have characterized as avoidance behavior, that is, all indirect approaches to the teaching of writing. We should encourage the teaching of writing by the direct method. In the training of writing teachers, it follows that we should spend little time teaching theory, and as much time as possible

helping the teachers teach, and write, by the direct method. If we design a course or institute that emphasizes theory, or anything that we can stand-up teach, then we will inevitably suggest to the teachers that teaching of writing is stand-up teaching. To paraphrase Moffett, "by pedagogical slight of hand, we will have transformed an output activity into something to be read about." To the extent that we teach what we do, to the extent that we teach through example, we should be careful to avoid teaching writing teachers by any indirect method.

But what, you might well now ask, is the direct method? The most direct method is the writing tutorial. At the University of Massachusetts, we teach our Expository Writing courses almost exclusively by the tutorial method. As long as classes remain below eighteen students, we can continue to teach in this way. At Springfield Technical High School in Springfield, Massachusetts, the teachers teach writing individually to their students in writing laboratory classes. The classes are analogous to chemistry laboratories, or art studio classes. The students write, and the teachers become roving editors. So it is possible to teach writing, both at the secondary and at the college level, by the direct method.

In a summer Institute for the Teaching of Writing, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, we worked with 42 secondary-school teachers of writing for a six-week summer session. During this summer session, they taught writing by the direct method in high-school writing laboratory classes. The teachers were themselves taught writing by the direct method, in weekly writing tutorials. They did listen to a few experts talk about aspects of the writing process, but the situation at the center

of the Institute was the single writing teacher working with the single apprentice writer. Through the laboratory class and the tutorial, Institute participants experienced both the role of direct-method writing teacher and direct-method writing student. The results of the Institute were interesting and positive, but before I get to them I will describe the writing laboratory classes, in which participants were teachers, and the writing tutorials, in which the participants were writers.

In the summer of 1978, every morning at 8:00, a bus with fourteen Institute teachers and two staff members left Amherst and travelled to Springfield Technical High School, where the Institute had three tenth-grade writing laboratory classes of thirty students. The syllabus was a sequence of writing assignments. The students wrote in class, and as they wrote the Institute teachers, each responsible for six student writers, acted as editors. The class lasted for 90 minutes. At the end of class, students left their work on their desks. Some of this writing was then duplicated and became the subject of a post-practicum session that stressed the diagnosis of particular examples of student writing.

The most conspicuous virtue of the post-practicum sessions was that we were talking about real students and real pieces of student writing. There was a limit on the scope of what I have come to recognize as the "teacher fiction," a minor genre that flourishes in teacher-training situations. The teacher fiction most often begins with "What these kids need is" or "But my students..." When one of these teacher fictions begins to bloom, the leader, Professor Lebeny, was able to say, "Yes, but we are talking about Bill and Bill's essay, and the question before us is "what will we say to Bill tomorrow that will cause him to improve this piece of writing?" The

post-practicum group would then decide what the editor should do. The next day the editor would do what the group had suggested, and in the following post-practicum session, the results would be in. Had the strategy worked? Or not? And in either case, why?

That this aspect of the Institute was effective in changing teacher behavior is an understatement. At the end of the summer session, 38 out of 42 participants indicated that they intended to incorporate the writing laboratory into their writing curricula. At the end of the follow-up year, thirty of the 42 had extensively used the writing laboratory in their year's work in English.

The Institute participants who were tutoring Springfield tenth graders in the laboratory classes were themselves being tutored by Institute staff in a program of regular writing tutorials. The tutorial program was modelled on the Advanced Expository Writing course at the University, a course that we teach, in many cases, entirely by tutorial. Through our experience at the University, we have learned that the tutorial is just a format, and that there can be good and bad tutorials. One of our graduate students, Charles Sides, has completed a study of writing tutorials now being given in our English Department. He has attended tutorials, talked with faculty, talked with students, and listened to hundreds of hours of taped tutorials. He finds many of us using the tutorial as an occasion to give a lecture to an audience of one. In too many cases, the tutor spoke in general terms about writing and writers, and spent little of the time speaking directly to the student writer about the piece of writing at hand.

With Sides' work in hand, we approached our Institute tutorials with

a generally agreed-upon definition of "good" tutorials. Good tutorials will have these characteristics:

1. They will be open-ended. The tutor will not have a single program. The tutor may have a goal, but not a single path toward that goal.
2. The tutor will be responsive, and will not talk too much.
3. The tutor will emphasize direct response to the writing at hand.
4. The tutor will not consider just the final product, but will require writers to bring all drafts, scratch-work, all pieces of paper that contributed to the final draft. In this way, the tutor can have a window on the writer's writing process, and suggest adjustments, if necessary.
5. The tutor will be aware of writing as behavior: avoidance strategies, anxiety levels, and so on.
6. The tutor will approach the student as a fellow-writer, and will bring samples of his own writing, with ruined first-drafts, failed attempts, and so forth.
7. The tutor will approach writing as a sequence of <u>choices</u> made by the writer. The tutor will, when possible, explore probable consequences of alternate choices: eg. different opening sentences, alternate structures or sequences, different voices, different rhetorical stances.
8. The tutor will, in a non-threatening way, push the writer toward publication.

At the Institute, according to our definition, we had good tutorials. The summer schedule was designed to emphasize the tutorials' importance.

Each week, every teacher spent eight hours writing, and each week brought this writing to a 45-minute tutorial with a staff member. The tutors were members of the University's English Department; all had had

extensive experience as writers and editors, and as writing tutors in the department's course in advanced expository writing. To emphasize the importance of the tutorials, the staff scheduled a writing tutorial for each teacher on the first day of the Institute. Tutorials took place on Wednesdays, when all other activities were suspended. This day the teachers named "W-Day," or "Writing-Day."

In the tutorials, the tutors functioned as editors. There were no textbooks, no program, no grid of assignments. The writers were told to spend at least eight hours each week engaged in some aspect of the writing process. They were told to bring the product of this time--drafts, notes, abortive beginnings, completed work--to the weekly tutorial. During this time, the tutor would review the material with the writer and say what was necessary. The writer would leave with plans for the next eight hours of writing. The plans might include revision of the material submitted, or new directions, or both. Armed with these plans, but not bound by them, the writer would spend eight hours during the next week engaged in the writing process and would bring the product of that activity to the next tutorial.

Because the writers brought all their rough material to the tutorial, the tutor had a window on their creative processes. It often happened that the final draft was in some ways worse than the first draft. If this were the case, the tutor knew that the writer's editing was destructive, and could address that problem, which might be a lack of confidence in the first, spontaneous product, or an inappropriate sense of what was good writing. It sometimes happened that the writer spent much of the writing

time starting at the paper, in some way blocked. If this were the case, some free-writing exercises from Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers might be suggested. Sometimes the writing failed because the writer put off writing until the night before; if this were the case, the tutor could point out the writer's need to manage writing-time better.

Whatever the problem, the writer learned that writing problems are complicated and various and that each requires a different remedy. There is no single writing disease that can be cured by a single medicine, or text, or curriculum. Indeed, many of the Institute participants discovered that a writer who is a blocked writer given one subject may become, given another subject, a writer who needs to prune and edit.

The teachers wrote on topics of their own choosing. The writing had to be expository--no poems, plays, or short stories were allowed. The teachers could not, moreover, write curriculum units for the tutorials; they were to be writers, not teachers, and teacher-writing would blur the distinction. For the same reason they could not write about the Institute, or about their own classes, or about their experiences as teachers. During the summer, most wrote in a number of genres: autobiography, parody, persuasive essays, descriptive essays. They wrote about subjects that were important to them: their reasons for leaving the Church, their reaction to their experiences in World War II, their involvement in drum and bugle corps, their changing relationship to their friends, children, or spouse.

Because writers write for publication, the staff arranged for the publication of the teachers' writing, but in a planned sequence of events designed to maintain in the writers a productive level of anxiety. We did not say anything about publication for the first two weeks. The staff

reported that in the first week the teachers were extremely anxious about the tutorial itself, and clearly if we had talked about publication at this point, they would have become still more anxious and might have stopped writing altogether. After the second week, however, when the tutorials had become more-or-less routine, we announced that at the third week's tutorial we would expect a piece ready for publication. To make the task seem possible, we established a length limit of three pages. This announcement produced new anxiety, and a great deal of late-night writing and editing in the Institute dormitory. The first volume of essays, titled Writers at Work, was copied, bound, and distributed to the Institute members at the beginning of the fourth week of the summer session. Writers at Work was an immediate, if local, success: the teachers read it, they talked to other writers about the essays in the book, they mailed copies home, and they rejoiced in what was for all of them their first publication. When we announced that there would be a second publication at the end of the sixth week, they were delighted. The title of this publication, Writing Teachers Writing, signalled their imminent return to their profession. This time, each contributed a somewhat longer piece. The book came to more than two-hundred pages of prose that was remarkable for its variety and consistently high quality.

A necessary aspect of the Institute was a formal evaluation, required by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This evaluation suggests that the Institute was remarkably effective in changing the behavior and attitudes of our teachers in their work in the teaching of writing. The evaluation further suggests that the two most effective elements in the Institute were the Springfield Writing Laboratory classes and the writing tutorials.

Our evaluator had these materials to work with: pre- and post-Institute course syllabi and sets of graded papers from each participant; and pre and post-Institute statements about the value of expository writing, the person's view of their own writing competence, the person's attitudes toward writing and the teaching of writing. A review of pre- and post-Institute syllabi reveals this wonderful fact: after the Institute, teachers increased the time they spent working with students and their writing by a factor of 100%. Statements such as this were frequent: "Thanks largely to the Institute, I have come to view the teaching of expository writing as my most important function as an English teacher." Along with the increase in direct-method teaching comes a corresponding decrease in indirect-method teaching: less reliance of "grammar lessons," much less time spent on the making of literary criticism. The post-Institute responses are filled with testimonials to the effect of the program on the teachers' confidence in themselves as writers.

Looking at the sets of graded papers, it is possible to discern a similar change in direction. Pre-institute papers tended to be over-marked, and the marked papers gave the distinct impression that the markings were being used to justify a grade. Post-Institute student papers tended to be more lightly marked, and conveyed a sense that one writer was talking to another writer, trying to help.

The participants' experience in the tutorials was clearly the source of this change: pre-institute essays on "the value of expository writing" stressed the practical applications of writing---business letters, basic skills needed on the 'outside'; post-Institute essays on the same subject tended to see expository writing as a process of discovery. One participant

wrote, after the Institute, that expository writing was valuable because it "helps the student realize what he thinks and feels."

The evaluator asked the participants to rate aspects of the Institute on a variety of scales. Of all the "teacher" experiences they had, they rated the Springfield Writing Laboratory Classes by far the most useful. On a scale of 1--5, the item "value of personal writing experience" scored 4.51. The item "value of tutorial in terms of teaching" scored 3.89. This item, tested again a year after the Institute, rose to 4.51. The item "extent that tutorials changed your view of yourself as a writer," on a scale of 1--3 where 1 equalled worse, 2 equalled no change, and 3 equalled better, the group mean response was 2.76.

Beyond the evaluation, the full-year follow-up allowed us to travel to the schools and see the teachers at work. We find that the teachers are indeed teaching more writing, and teaching it more directly, in most cases. We find that they are writing themselves. Indeed, one of the Institute's less happy consequences is that two of our people are well on their way to be coming full-time professional writers. We may have blown these people entirely out of the teaching profession.

But perhaps this is the final indicator of the Institute's success. It seems to us, in retrospect, that we accomplished what we set out to do: we taught teachers that they could be writers. If the profession writing is in America in 1980 more attractive than the profession teaching, that is something we can do precious little about.